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SUCCESS STORY

Youth Join Forces to Improve Their Communities



OTI/Lebanon

A health-awareness festival organized by youth from mixed Lebanese-Palestinian neighborhoods near the Ein El Helweh refugee camp brought more than 300 people together for games and entertainment.

“The neighbors were so supportive of our efforts. They were coming on their balconies and telling us how much they appreciate what we are doing... I have never seen the neighborhood like this.”

—Youth committee leader

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October 2008 – A group of young Lebanese and Palestinians near the volatile Ein El Helweh refugee camp have established themselves as role models for other youth by making a positive difference in their community. They are now replicating their experience in an adjacent neighborhood plagued by similar challenges of instability, poverty, and lack of services.

The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) partnered with a local nongovernmental organization to provide leadership training to youth in Al Villat, a mixed Lebanese-Palestinian community deeply affected by recurring violence in the nearby refugee camp. The youths then applied their skills by organizing a one-month children’s program that promoted nonviolence through recreational, educational, and artistic activities.

The program culminated in an environmental campaign in which the trainees led street-cleaning and mural-painting activities and arranged a public concert for 250 residents. To ensure the event’s success, the youths worked with municipal authorities, civic groups, and a local army unit, which provided security.

“We want to work on our neighborhood to make it a better place and then present it as a model for other neighborhoods,” said one of the young activists. The youth committee of Al Villat has already reached out to youth in neighboring Al Ismailiya.

The two communities have much in common. Their proximity to Ein El Helweh, a hotbed for extremist movements, makes them particularly vulnerable to radical agendas. In this politically charged environment, ethnic lines harden, conflicts brew, and youth are often seen as instigators of trouble.

The youth of Al Villat seek to change that stereotype by embracing civic responsibilities and initiating community improvements. They surpassed the original scope of the OTI-funded project by transferring their skills to Al Ismailiya through youth-to-youth training and joint activities, including a health-awareness festival that drew crowds of people from both neighborhoods.

The young activists have been inspired by positive responses from the community and, according to one of the lead organizers, are eager to forge ahead. “This is only the beginning!” he said.